

Public Interest Legal Careers

The practice of law provides a unique opportunity to further social and environmental justice, and many lawyers have fulfilling and sustainable careers in the public interest sector. However, career paths for lawyers who wish to practise public interest law are not as well-defined as career paths in the more conventional areas of law. More initiative is required by lawyers and law students to search out opportunities which make a positive impact while at the same time make a living. The CSO's Public Interest Coordinator, Tracy Wachmann, is available to help UBC Law students and Alumni clarify areas of interest, provide information on existing and potential public interest law opportunities and assist students and Alumni in building a strategy for pursuing and maintaining a public interest legal career.

Is public interest law right for me?

You may want to consider a career in public interest law if you are:

- interested in, connected to, or dedicated to a particular issue, cause, or community; and looking to incorporate this involvement into your professional life
- not set on working at a traditional law firm
- creative and entrepreneurial enough to seek out or create your own position
- prepared to fundraise to support your position or organization

What is public interest law?

Public interest law has been described as “legal work on behalf of individuals, groups and causes that are underserved by the for-profit bar”. More specifically, it is legal work that is intended to:

- Secure justice for disadvantaged and underserved individuals or communities
- Assert, protect and defend human rights, civil rights and civil liberties
- Preserve and protect the world's health and resources for the benefit of the public good
- Promote the public's interests protected by agencies and governments

Where is it practised?

Public interest law includes many issues and practice settings. While some organizations focus on one issue, many work on several. Public interest organizations include, but are not limited to:

- Legal aid clinics and direct services offices which provide civil legal services to clients who cannot afford a lawyer
- Public interest advocacy organizations which focus on law reform efforts in one or more specialty areas or advocate on behalf of a particular group
- Private practice firms and lawyers who define a major portion of their work as serving the public interest such as those practicing union-side labour law, refugee and immigration law, aboriginal rights, human rights and criminal defence
- Boards, agencies and commissions
- International organizations
- All levels of government: federal, provincial, regional and municipal

What are some substantive areas of public interest law?

Some of the more common substantive areas of public interest law are:

- animal welfare
- arts
- children's rights
- civil liberties and free speech
- consumer protection
- corporate/government accountability
- criminal law/prisoner's rights
- disability rights
- domestic violence issues
- education
- elder law
- environment
- family law
- first nations/aboriginal law
- Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender rights
- health issues eg. HIV/AIDS
- housing/homelessness
- human rights
- immigration and refugee law
- multiculturalism
- poverty law
- social economic development
- racial disparity
- women's rights
- workers' rights

How do I prepare for a public interest career?

Most public interest employers consider a number of factors when evaluating a candidate such as whether an applicant has developed specific advocacy skills in litigation, investigation, negotiation, research and writing, and most importantly, a demonstrated public interest commitment. Law school grades are much less of a factor. Because public interest employers tend to give entry-level lawyers significant responsibility, they all emphasize skills, substantive legal knowledge and a demonstrated commitment to the specific area of public interest law. All public interest employers seek candidates who have developed substantial lawyering skills in law school, through experiences such as clinics, internships, journals, classes, moot court, and/or pro bono work.

UBC Law offers opportunities for students to get involved in extracurricular activities that will help to develop the necessary skills and demonstrate a commitment to the public interest realm:

- *Pro Bono Students Canada* - provides experience through placements with public interest organizations
- *Law Students' Legal Advice Program (LSLAP)* - provides clinical experience for students who represent individuals who would otherwise be unable to afford legal assistance
- *Law Journals* - Canadian Family Law Journal; Canadian Journal of Elder Law; Masks: the on-line Journal of Law and Theatre; UBC Law Review
- *Clubs and on-campus organizations* – for example, Canadian Lawyers Abroad, Environmental Law Group, Law Students for Choice, Law Students of Colour United, Outlaws, Social Justice Action Network, UBC Law Amnesty Group, Women's Caucus and campus-wide student organizations
- *Off-campus public interest organizations* – review the CSO's *Public Interest Opportunities* handout and visit the Public Interest Coordinator for more information about local, regional and national organizations

What CSO resources are available to assist public interest law students?

Tracy has an open-door policy and welcomes students and Alumni to drop by with questions and comments. She is also available by appointment for one-on-one career counselling and strategy building sessions. Appointments may be scheduled on Symplicity at www.ubclawcareers.com. The CSO offers the following additional resources:

- Workshops and information sessions on public interests skills, practice areas, practise settings and job search skills
- Social Justice Forum and other public interest networking events
- Public Interest Work Placement Program where 6 UBC Law students are funded by the Law Foundation of BC to work at public interest organizations for the summer
- Outreach to public interest organizations to establish prospective employers
- Information on public interest career paths and job search strategies
- Assistance with the creation of public interest internships, externships and articles
- Information about local, regional, national and international public interest law opportunities
- UBC Law also offers the Deans Public Interest Fellowship – see the CSO’s *Public Interest Funding* handout for more information

Students and Alumni of UBC Law may access public interest related job postings, workshops, handouts and view a calendar of events on Symplicity at www.ubclawcareers.com.